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ABSTRACT

A study of school principals in the Mississippi delta area of Arkansas explored principals' perceptions of violence in school, and their feelings towards the necessity of violence-prevention programs. Questionnaires were mailed to 292 principals of elementary, middle, and high schools, and 239 responded (81.8 percent). Of the responses, there were 109 elementary, 39 middle school, and 91 high school principals. The responses showed that 96.6 percent of the principals feel there is a need for violence-prevention programs for students, and 97.1 percent believe that inservice violence-prevention programs are needed for teachers. The study shows there is a feeling among principals that greater emphasis on crime prevention in needed in the middle and high schools. Middle school principals reported the highest level of gang-related incidence; however, there is little difference among the three school levels on the number of violent acts committed in school. All the principals identified fights as the most common acts of violence. Fewer than one-half of the principals reported violence involving weapons, and fewer than one-fourth reported gang-related violence. The study revealed that even among rural high schools violence is an issue, and violence prevention is a key concern among most principals. Includes seven tables and nine references. (KDP)

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PRINCIPAL REPORTS OF VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS AND NEED FOR A VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM

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PRINCIPAL REPORTS OF VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS AND NEED FOR A VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM

The public is becoming more increasingly aware of youth violence. For example, a newspaper reported the Harris poll of 2500 students which showed about 10% said they had shot a gun at someone, 11% said they had been shot at, and about one-third said they knew someone who had been killed or hurt by gunfire (Scanlon, 1993). A rural state like Arkansas is not immune from these acts of violence. The same newspaper later reported that during one school year over 1,000 weapons had been found on students or on school grounds in Arkansas, nearly 40,000 fights among students had been recorded, and over 800 school staff members had been physically or verbally assaulted (Stumpe & Scanlon, 1993).

The United States is a very violent society. In a comparison with 21 industrialized nations, U.S. homicides among males 15-24 years of age (21.9 per 100,000) were 4.4 times higher than the next highest country (Fingerhut & Kleinman, 1990). Homicide is the second leading cause of death among the 15-24 year old population in the U.S.; approximately one in five high school students carried a weapon to school; approximately 28,200 students are physically attacked in secondary schools each month; and an average of 18 fighting incidences occurs per 100 students each month (Gorski & Pilotto, 1993).

Violence in schools is not a new phenomenon. In a discussion of a 1978 survey of urban youth, 40% of all reported robberies and 36% of the assaults took place in schools (Menacker, Weldon, & Hurwitz, 1989). Over the past six years, surveys of school executives have shown increasing acts of violence at all levels (Boothe, Flick, Kirk, Bradley, & Keough, 1993). Of particular note was the upsurge in fights between female students.

In discussing a recent U.S. Department of Education survey, Ordovensky (1993) noted the contrast between school administrators and teachers reports of violence. Higher proportions of teachers than principals reported more problems with student violence, weapons, robberies, verbal and physical abuse, vandalism, and racial tension. In response to acts of violence in the schools, violence prevention programs and curricula have been developed (Prothrow-Stith, 1987; Steinberg, 1991).

The purpose of this study was to assess principals' perceptions of the extent of violent acts in the schools and to determine the need for a violence prevention program.

Method

Elementary, middle/junior high school, and high school principals throughout the Mississippi delta region of eastern Arkansas were surveyed by mailed questionnaire about the extent of incidents of violence in their schools and the need for a violence prevention program. The questionnaire items addressed the need for a violence prevention program by level (elementary, middle/junior high, high school), by gender

(males and females), and the need for an in-service violence prevention program for teachers. Principals were also asked how often various acts of violence occurred at their schools and how they were made aware of the occurrences.

Results

From the initial mailing to 292 principals, 142 responded the first month (48.6%). A follow-up mailing produced a total of 239 responses (81.8%). For the three school grade levels, 109 elementary, 39 middle/junior high school and 91 high school principals returned questionnaires.

As shown in Table 1, 96.6% of the combined group of principals reported a need for a violence prevention program for students; 97.1% reported a need for an in-service violence prevention program for teachers.

Most principals (59.8%) reported the violence prevention program for students should be offered in a class at school, such as Health, and 11.3% reported the program could be offered as an extra-curricular activity after school. However, 41.8% also felt violence prevention programs for students could be sponsored by an agency other than the school.

In Table 2, fights were identified as the most often observed acts of violence from alternatives presented on the questionnaire. Most principals (97.0%) indicated they were aware of fights in their school during the past three years. For this time period, more than half of the principals reported being aware of alcohol/substance abuse by students (58.4%) and of student confrontations with school personnel (55.2%). Principals also indicated they were aware of students carrying or using weapons (42.2%) and gang-related activities (24.1%). Thirteen percent of the principals surveyed reported awareness of student attacks on school personnel during the past three years.

Principals reported they had become aware of acts of violence from students (94.4%), teachers (91.8%), and their own observation (91.3%). (See Table 3.) Most principals also reported acts of violence had been brought to their attention by parents (81.3%) and school personnel other than teachers (80.1%). Less than half of the principals reported acts of violence by students had been brought to their attention by community members (48.4%) or school board members (26.5%).

Table 4 presents the mean responses by principals at the three grade levels (elementary, middle/junior high school, and high school) on the need for a violence prevention program. No significant differences were noted on the perceived need at the elementary level, for males, nor for females. However, elementary principals reported more need for middle/junior high school and high school students to receive a violence prevention program than did high school principals. Elementary principals also perceived a greater need for in-service programs for teachers than the other principals.

Table 5 compares the three school level principals' responses concerning reported acts of violence. No significant differences were noted on fights, confrontations, and attacks on school personnel. However, middle/junior high school principals reported observing more gang-related activity and more carrying and use of

weapons than did elementary and high school principals. Both high school and middle/junior high school principals reported observing more alcohol/substance abuse than did elementary principals.

Table 6 compares the three levels of school principals for the various sources by which the principal became aware of acts of violence at their school. No significant differences were noted among the seven sources.

The mean responses for all principals on the need for a violence prevention program were contrasted across the three levels and for males and females. As shown in Table 7, significantly greater need for a violence prevention was noted at both the middle/junior high and high school levels than at the elementary level. Also, the perceived need for a violence prevention program was greater for males than for females.

Discussion

Most all of the elementary, middle/junior high, and high school principals surveyed throughout the Mississippi delta area of eastern Arkansas reported the need for a violence prevention program for students and teachers. The need was perceived greater by school principals at the upper levels than by elementary level principals. Need was perceived greater for male students than for female students.

Fights were the most common act of violence in the schools as observed by nearly all the principals. However, alcohol/substance abuse and student confrontations with school personnel had been observed by more than half the principals. More than two in five of the principals reported incidences of carrying or use of weapons in the schools. Less than a quarter of the principals had observed gang-related activities. One in eight reported student attacks on school personnel had occurred during the past three years.

Consistent with the literature presented, rural America is not void of incidents of violence in the schools. Principals' concern with this issue was reflected with the 97% response of the school principals indicating a need for a violence prevention program.

Table 1

Percentage of Principals Indicating Need
for a Violence Prevention Program

Need for a Violence Prevention Program	No Need	Some Need	Much Need
Overall Need	3.4	36.6	60.1
At Elementary School	12.0	64.0	24.0
At Middle School	4.6	42.4	53.0
At High School	3.4	45.1	51.5
For Male Students	2.9	48.7	48.3
For Female Students	6.4	68.5	25.1
For Teachers (In-Service)	2.9	59.7	37.4

Table 2

Percentages of Principals Reporting Extent of Acts
of Violence Observed Over the Past Three Years

Acts of Violence	None	Some	A lot
Fights	3.0	79.7	17.2
Gang-related Activities	75.9	22.5	1.2
Alcohol/Substance Abuse	41.6	54.5	3.9
Carrying/Use of Weapons	57.8	41.7	0.4
Students Confronting School Personnel	44.8	54.3	0.9
Student Attacks on School Personnel	87.0	12.6	0.4

Table 3

Percentages of Principals Reporting Extent to Which They Have Become Aware of Acts of Violence at School

Source of Awareness of Acts of Violence	Extent of Awareness: Never	Sometimes	Often
My Own Observation	8.7	75.5	15.7
From Students	5.6	81.2	13.2
From Teachers	8.2	77.3	14.6
From Other School Personnel	19.9	75.7	4.4
From Parents	18.7	78.3	3.0
From School Board Members	73.5	25.1	1.3
From Community Members	51.6	47.1	1.3

Table 4

Contrasts of Mean Responses for Principals by Level on Reported Needs for Violence Prevention Programs

Area of Need for a Violence Prev Program	Elem N=109	Mid/Jr N=39	High N=91	F-stat	F-prob
Elementary School	1.11	1.03	1.17	0.679	.508
Middle/Junior High	1.60	1.46	1.38	3.371	.036
High School	1.67	1.48	1.30	10.30	.000
For Males	1.52	1.41	1.39	1.589	.206
For Females	1.22	1.15	1.17	0.310	.734
For Teachers (in-service)	1.43	1.33	1.24	3.070	.048

Table 5

Contrasts of Mean Responses for Principals by Level on Extent of Acts of Violence During Past Three Years

Acts of Violence	Elem N=109	Mid/Jr N=39	High N=91	F-stat	F-prob
Fights	1.18	1.11	1.11	0.682	.507
Gang-related Activities	0.23	0.49	0.19	5.928	.003
Alcohol/Substance Abuse	0.36	0.84	0.85	26.79	.000
Carrying/Use of Weapons	0.39	0.63	0.38	3.899	.022
Students Confronting School Personnel	0.56	0.50	0.58	0.336	.715
Student Attacks on School Personnel	0.18	0.11	0.09	1.518	.221

Table 6

Contrasts of Mean Responses for Principals by Level on Extent of Awareness of Acts of Violence by Sources

Source of Awareness	Elem N=109	Mid/Jr N=39	High N=91	F-stat	F-prob
My Own Observation	1.02	1.15	1.09	1.241	.291
From Students	1.05	1.15	1.08	0.922	.399
From Teachers	1.02	1.15	1.08	1.261	.285
Other School Personnel	0.81	0.84	0.89	0.630	.533
From Parents	0.89	0.89	0.76	3.185	.115
School Board Members	0.22	0.42	0.28	2.406	.093
Community Members	0.49	0.61	0.46	0.991	.373

Table 7

Contrasts of Mean Responses on Needs
for a Violence Prevention Program

Contrasting Needs for Violence Prevention Program	(1) Mean	(2) Mean	Dep. t-stat	Dep. t-prob
(1) Elementary Level vs. (2) Middle/Junior High Level	1.10	1.51	-9.95	.000
(1) Elementary Level vs. (2) High School Level	1.10	1.49	-8.83	.000
(1) Middle/Junior High vs. (2) High School Level	1.49	1.48	0.32	.746
(1) For Males vs. (2) For Females	1.46	1.19	8.11	.000

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